

Literature Teaching

By Shu Wei

The usefulness of teaching literature courses at teachers colleges and universities in China has been greatly challenged by professionals such as Durant and Fabb (1990): "Many traditional ways of studying literature have been questioned and undetermined, to an extent that it is hard to press on with the old methods and orthodoxies." The results of China's national follow-up investigation of literature teaching (1991, see Appendix) reveal that the current teaching of literature may have failed to achieve its purpose. Among all the university subjects being investigated, a mere 5% of graduates declared that they used their knowledge of literature in their present classroom teaching, and 46% suggested that literature be an optional course. This reveals two facts:

1. For most of the graduates, there is a wide gap between what they learned in literature courses and how they can use the knowledge to enrich their teaching.
2. The knowledge they learned in literature courses does not seem to be relevant to their teaching.

Many educators believe that if teaching literature fails to enhance today's classrooms, it is not the fault of the literature or the learner, but rather of the teachers and the strategies and approaches they used: "Learning what is meaningful and relevant depends partly on what is taught and partly on how it is taught" (Brandes and Ginnis 1986:12).

This article explores ways of making the teaching and learning of literature more meaningful. The discussion focuses on the current teaching approaches used in literature classes in teacher training courses and in some universities and colleges.

Teaching Approach

Partly because of the special features of the academic content of literature courses and partly because of the deep-rooted, long-prevailing traditions of teaching in China, the teacher's role is basically that of instructor and knowledge transmitter. Thus, the teaching approach in literature courses is mainly lecture-based with teacher-centered transmissive models. Because of this, there are very few classroom activities that are learner-centered. Consequently, interaction between the trainer and trainees is rare. The approach thereby ignores the learners' potentials and resources.

For example, in most courses the teacher first assigns a text for teacher trainees to read before class. Then, in the classroom, the teacher's lecture centers on the background information: the historic period of the author, the society of that time, and explanations about the thematic or stylistic features of the author's work. Thus, the approach to teaching is mainly an historical-biographical critique, focusing on the historic and social background of the literary works being dealt with and on the lives of the authors.

With the emphasis on the events in stories, teachers focus on comprehension skills. This kind of teaching approach is described by Benton (1992:1) as the tyranny of the two C's—comprehension skills and critical skills—over the two R's—the role of reader and the nature of literary response.

Since the classes are teacher-centered, learners have few opportunities to process their own learning experiences and to formulate their own feelings about the literary text. Thus, all the information about the literary work, the author, the history, the society, and the style or theme of the work are taught before the learners have the chance to explore and to experience the text. Consequently, direct interaction between the learners and the literary work is nonexistent because the teacher's influence and authority preempts any opportunities for the learners to make their own discoveries. As a result, learners read a comparatively large amount of literary work, but whether their capabilities of understanding, appreciating, and analyzing literary texts have been raised is questionable.

From Transmission to Interaction

Should the teacher encourage and foster learners' open-ended responses to a literary work? McRae (1991:69) points out that elementary, imaginative engagements must arouse curiosity or stimulate a reaction like puzzlement, laughter, a wish to find out more, or a wish to avoid involvement. In doing so, they open up interactive possibilities. McRae believes that a literary work that provokes no reaction is counterproductive to learning.

Imaginative literary texts possess a multifarious richness and depth that far transcends any thorough discursive investigation. Literature can always provoke thought, reflection, associations, and various responses in students. In many literary works, the meanings can be interpreted differently by each person, and by the same person at various moments in his or her life.

Because reading occurs through time, the students' responses to a literary work in language classrooms must be revised continuously as their perceptions, ideas, and evaluations change. During the learner's interaction with the text, many elements such as moral issues, decisions, revisions, anticipation, retrospection, defenses, expectations, fantasies, transformations, mental images, associations, reversal, evaluations, and recoveries will involve the learner in the class. In other words, the meaning of literary work is realized through the process of reading and reception. Understanding literary work is not a product, but a process—a dynamic series of events dedicated to building consistency.

The teacher can encourage learners to have direct and spontaneous interaction with the literary work by focusing on creative participation. The teacher can act as mediator to help learners interact with the text more profoundly. The teacher's role, as defined by McRae (1991:97), is as "intermediary between author, literary work, and receiver" in order to "open up a multi-directional sphere of interaction."

Four-elements Response

In the traditional teaching model, when dealing with a new literary text, teachers first gather information from related sources, and then lecture the learners, allowing them to absorb the

information. The intention is to help learners better understand the work. But as our experiences have shown, the result impedes direct interaction between the learners and the text, simply because the teacher's influence and authority preempts the opportunity for the learners to make their own discoveries.

With the intention of looking for a more open-ended approach, I have altered Benton's Four-Elements Response Model (1992) so as to engage our learners in the process of interacting with the text material. In our present training course, one class normally has 12 learners, so we divide the class into four groups of three, with each group being assigned a task (Figure 1).

Reconstruction

Reading literary work is both anticipatory and retrospective. Since reading is forward-bound, the readers can anticipate what is to come. Thus, it is important to allow time for readers to satisfy their curiosities or imaginative anticipations so that they can enjoy the text.

I have chosen one passage from *Ulysses* to demonstrate an alternative approach. In chapter 18 of *Ulysses* (Joyce 1996), the heroine, Molly, lies in bed thinking over the occurrences of the day and of her lifetime. This excerpt provides the reader with a typical example of the unfettered flow of the stream of consciousness.

Molly's soliloquy seems to be filled with unorganized sequences of events and people, yet the fertile chaos of everyday historical time coincides with the structuring principle of art. Her stream-of-consciousness narrative is a literary work of colourful life experiences, presented by "both a welling up of suppressed images from memory and an aesthetic shaping of a new version of things" (Kearney 1988:40). Therefore, I ask one group of learners to reconstruct the events of the passage, so they may discover how narratives work in novels.

Mental Imagery

Mental imagery is a way of making meaning from literary texts. Whatever our idiosyncratic mental images, readers commonly experience this sort of picturing as an important element in responding to the text. While reading, every reader will have his/her own picture that is made out of all the things the reader has seen or experienced throughout the reader's own life. Thus, the reader will interject personal meaning or significance into the characters' development and the events. Therefore, I may ask those in the second group to focus on presenting their own images of the passage.

Interacting on an affective level

Another response to the text can be gained by associating that which is in the readers' own lives with what is presented or described in the text. In other words, we consider how to bring learners' own experiences into the responding process. So, I ask the third group of the learners to associate the passage to their own life experiences.

Evaluating the elements of narration

Since readers' responses are fundamental to interpreting the meaning of the text, each learner should decide whether he/she is enjoying the text, and if the author is achieving the desired effects. Thus, I may ask the fourth group to concentrate on evaluating the mechanics or stylistics of the narration.

Conclusion

This interactive teaching works well since it can actively involve the learners at the very beginning of, and throughout, the learning process. When the focus of teaching shifts from a top-down teacher- knowledge approach to the participatory student-response approach, the meanings of literary texts become personal through the spontaneous reaction and direct response of the learners. Most learners enjoy this interactive approach because they are actively involved and can discuss the literary texts. Above all, this approach makes the materials meaningful. Working together in groups, the learners come to realize that literature is not fossilized knowledge, but is a rich and vigorous resource that can be explored and used in their future teaching.

References

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Figure 1 Group Activities		
STAGE 1: Group work responding to a text discussion. Reach an agreement or respond to a text.		
Group A	A	Reconstruct the

	A	A	events in the passage
Group B	B	B	Present their own mental images
Group C	C	C	Associate with their own life experiences
Group D	D	D	Evaluate the mechanics of the narration
During this stage each group will discuss its topic and reach a consensus			
STAGE 2: Sharing ideas of responses to a text. Divide the learners into three new groups, so that each group will have a member with different information. Now, the members of the new groups will share their ideas. Each group will then prepare a summary which it presents to the whole class.			
A	B	A	B
C	D	C	D

APPENDIX

In 1991 the State Education Commission of China conducted an investigation of literature teaching. It surveyed English major graduates from 11 teacher training programs at universities and colleges. These graduates presently teach English. The following table gives the results of that investigation.

Questionnaire Item	Percentage of subjects who agreed
Literature should be the priority of course content.	12%
I can use my literacy knowledge to serve my classroom teaching.	5%
The topics of B.A. dissertations should focus on literary subjects.	6%
If I had the opportunity I would choose to study literature again in the teachers university.	14%
Literature should become an optional course.	46%

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